How do politicians’ responses to scandals differ on social media? An evaluation of three case studies using the contingency theory

This study focused on furthering the research around the contingency theory, developed by Cancel et al. (1997), that focuses on discovering whether the response to the scandal is more accommodative or advocacy-focused. The study furthered this research by measuring whether politicians’ responses to sex scandals fall more on the advocacy or accommodative side of the theory. Additionally, this study also focused on whether there was a difference between how a politician responded to a scandal on social media, as compared to their responses on more traditional forms of media, such as press releases or media interviews. In order to accomplish this research, three case studies were reviewed: former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain’s 2011 sexual harassment scandal, former Representative Anthony Weiner’s 2010 sex scandal, and former Illinois Republican gubernatorial candidate Dan Rutherford’s 2014 sexual harassment scandal. Each scandal was reviewed extensively with a focus on their traditional media and social media responses to the scandal. This included looking at the press releases, media interviews and Twitter pages of the politicians’ studied. It was discovered that none of the responses on social media were at all accommodative, as all were advocacy-based responses. Additionally, almost all of the traditional media appearances were advocacy-focused as well, with few exceptions. It was thus concluded that social media is rarely used to make accommodative responses to scandals, due to the difficulty of responding thoroughly to the allegations. Overall, this study helps to provide further depth to the contingency theory and brings more clarity in exactly how politicians respond to scandals.